

# I REFUSE

to Preach a Boring Sermon!

*Engaging the 21st Century Listener*

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## INTRODUCTION

# Opening Thoughts on Refusing to Preach a Boring Sermon

As the daughter of a United Methodist preacher, a UM preacher myself, a seminary student sometime back, a church member listening to other preachers, and a seminary preaching professor, I cannot begin to count how many sermons I have listened to, evaluated, and preached. Quite often the preaching was the center of the service, the ultimate moment of the liturgy. The preaching, however, should be only one of the moments of connection between God, the preacher, and the congregation. Preaching is very important, don't get me wrong; for preaching has been an important component of what brings us together as followers of Christ.

Preaching has the amazing ability of placing the gathered community in dialogue with the word of God, with those present or in satellite locations or—via the web—with the world around the corner and across the world—and with the preacher who has prepared the message. Throughout the history of Christian faith communities, preaching has been present. Jesus was a preacher and teacher. He learned his method of teaching and preaching from Jewish teachers and from the traditions of teaching Torah in Jewish communities. Jesus spent time talking about the Realm of God when he traveled with his disciples. He taught and preached on mountains and plains, by the sea, on boats, and in synagogues. He spoke to small groups and huge gatherings of people. He was revered, and he was ridiculed. His words had power for some and signified danger for others. People flocked to hear him and to be in his presence. He was both charismatic and profoundly

personal in his relationships with his disciples and those who gathered to hear him. While we have a record of the nature of his teachings and in some cases the probable content as well, we also have a sense of how his words were received because that reception resulted in the spread of his teachings by the disciples and evangelists of his time, by written gospels and epistles written later, and by the spread of the Christian faith to virtually every corner of the globe.

But I have wondered: Did he have bad preaching days? Did some of his teaching moments fall flat on the ears of those listening? (Think about the disciples as portrayed in the Gospel of Mark.) Did some come to the mountain or by the sea to hear him and leave uninspired or disconnected? We don't know. But we do know that preachers have bad days, sermons that flop, messages that do not connect to our contexts, and listeners who are sometimes bored.

If you are a preacher, imagine the scene: you have worked for hours every day during the week doing research and making other preparations for a sermon on a text or topic you are excited to share on the coming Sunday. You have exegeted the text, studied the topic, researched several different commentaries, delved into the current context and the connections of that context to the text itself, and “wordsmithed” your manuscript or outline to near perfection.<sup>1</sup> You have practiced, prayed, and prepared. You have awakened early and gotten ready for the day—psychically, emotionally, vocally, etc. You feel invigorated to preach the word. You stand up, whether behind the pulpit of your church or in front of the seating area more casually, whether with a manuscript, outline, or no notes at all—and you begin to preach your prepared message.

You feel pretty good about how things are going, and you feel the Spirit in your soul as you preach. Then you look around the room and see people staring out the windows, taking a quick nap, and generally appearing uninterested. This moment has faced all

preachers, whether they want to admit it or not. It can be spirit-crushing. It can be a cruel blow to one's ego as well. Working so hard on something to share with your congregation and seeing them slumbering or otherwise disconnected is tough. It hurts. You ask, "How can they be this bored?"

If you are a community member who listens to sermons, imagine this scene: you have had a very busy week at work, with your family, and taking care of home and yard. You have made the decision to attend church, gotten up, and prepared for the time in worship, either at your usual spot or in a new community of faith. You have arrived, found a parking place, and gotten yourself and your family situated for the service. You have sung the songs, participated in the liturgy, and gotten prepared for the coming message. The preacher stands to speak, and at first you are excited by what he or she is sharing. The scripture text is one you don't know very well and you are eager to hear what she has to say about the passage. But not too long into the message, you sense your mind wandering, your interest waning, and your eyes closing.

You spend more time listening to your mind read off your grocery list than you do listening to the sermon. It can be a harsh experience to feel so disconnected from the preached word. It can be disconcerting to feel bored in church. How can you be bored by God's word? How can you find a sermon based on the story of Jesus insipid? You have often been inspired, challenged, educated, and transformed by the preacher's words, but not today. As you leave you wonder, "Now what am I supposed to live on this week spiritually?" You ask yourself, "How did the preacher make this stuff so boring?"

A number of things could be going on. The thermostat in the church may be set too high, the town carnival the night before left people feeling tired and sluggish, or the sermon itself may not be connecting in ways that the preacher had hoped and planned. Perhaps the congregation was in a place leading into

the preaching moment different from what the preacher thought. Maybe the preacher's preparations led to way more historical context than the sermon needed, and the people in the pews were not resonating with the information. Maybe the message did not relate well to what was going on in the lives and community of those present. Maybe it was just a bad day. Or perhaps the sermon was regrettably and unfortunately just plain boring.

No matter who you are, as you have journeyed in your faith with the church or any other configuration of faith communities, you have likely been subjected to at least a few dozen boring sermons. You have likely left a sanctuary feeling uninspired, unmotivated, and unfulfilled. You have probably sat there stumped by a preacher's words, wondering what in the world he or she was talking about. You may even have spent time hearing about the preacher's own life so much that you felt as if you had been their personal therapist for an hour a week. Maybe you have even considered sending a bill for your time as their therapist once or twice. You may have even been one of those folks catching a few zzzzzs during the sermon.

Boring and uninspiring sermons happen all the time. They come in many forms. They come in the guise of a "sermon" but may be more of a history lecture with a life lesson at the end. They may be a series of one story upon another story with little relationship one to the other. They may come as a formal "doctrinal treatise" teaching the beliefs of the church, with no way to understand the myriad theological terms used but not explained. And they may be a storytelling experience that should catch the imagination but doesn't. There are so many reasons why a congregation might hear the sermon as boring or experience the service itself as boring. How do we know? How do we keep this from happening in our work as preachers and worship leaders in a church with folks so hungry to be fed? And how do we help in the healing of folks who are just trying to survive in a hurting world?